

15. Jahrgang • 2018



MARTIN BUCER SEMINAR

MBS TEXTE 190

Thomas K. Johnson

Sacred Sex as a Christian Spiritual Discipline: In Pursuit of Fifty Shades of White



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Table of Contents

Inhaltsverzeichnis

Genesis 2:4–25.....	3
Exodus 20:14.....	4
1 Corinthians 6:12–7:7	4
Concerning Married Life	4
Annotation.....	10
The Author.....	11
Impressum	13

Sacred Sex as a Christian Spiritual Discipline: In Pursuit of Fifty Shades of White¹

Thomas K. Johnson

Genesis 2:4–25

This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, when the Lord God made the earth and the heavens.

5 Now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth and no plant had yet sprung up, for the Lord God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no one to work the ground, **6** but streams[b] came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground. **7** Then the Lord God formed a man[c] from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

8 Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. **9** The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

10 A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters. **11** The name of the first is the Pishon; it winds through the

entire land of Havilah, where there is gold. **12** (The gold of that land is good; aromatic resin and onyx are also there.) **13** The name of the second river is the Gihon; it winds through the entire land of Cush. **14** The name of the third river is the Tigris; it runs along the east side of Ashur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

15 The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. **16** And the Lord God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; **17** but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.”

18 The Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”

19 Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. **20** So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals.

But for Adam no suitable helper was found. ²¹ So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs^[g] and then closed up the place with flesh. ²² Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib^[h] he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

23 The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man."

24 That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh. **25** Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

Exodus 20:14

You shall not commit adultery.

I Corinthians 6:12–7:7

"I have the right to do anything," you say—but not everything is beneficial. "I have the right to do anything"—but I will not be mastered by anything. **13** You say, "Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both." The body, however, is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. **14** By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. **15** Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take

the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never!

16 Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, "The two will become one flesh."

17 But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit.

18 Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. **19** Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; **20** you were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your bodies.

Concerning Married Life

7 Now for the matters you wrote about: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman." **2** But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband. **3** The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. **4** The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife. **5** Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of

your lack of self-control. **6** I say this as a concession, not as a command. **7** I wish that all of you were as I am. But each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that.

When I was a philosophy professor in secular universities, I often had my students read an essay entitled “Plain Sex” by Alan Goldman. He was a top representative voice of the sexual revolution of the twentieth century. He asked, “What’s so different about sex that it requires such special rules?”

Goldman claims that sexual desire is merely desire for contact with another person’s body. There is no necessary connection, he claims, between sex and romance, love, communication, commitment, marriage, or reproduction. He continues, “Why should we consider it moral to play tennis with somebody we don’t love but immoral to have sex with somebody we don’t love? Why should we consider it moral to eat lunch with somebody of the same sex but immoral to have sex with that same person? Why should we be permitted to go to a movie purely for pleasure but not have sex purely for pleasure?”

To be fair, we must note that Goldman would not allow rape or sexual abuse. But in his view, there are no particular norms that apply to sexuality; there are only general principles such as mutual consent and respect that apply to all human relationships.

These are the best principles for sex from the world in which we live. Modern secularism has emptied life of meaning. Even sex is empty. We could hardly be any farther from the world of the Bible. Old-fashioned sexual immorality is not, I believe, as cold and cruel as “Plain Sex.”

When we open the Bible, we find ourselves in an entirely different world. This different mental and emotional world leads to different relationships and different results. The world of the Bible addresses our deepest emotional and relational needs. And we find a convincing answer to the question, “What is so special about sex?”

We read this answer in Genesis 2: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.” Or, as our older translations read, “A man will cleave to his wife,” or “A man shall cling to his wife.” The Hebrew world translated “cleave” or “cling” is “dabaq,” a fascinating word. On the one hand, it means to cling or stick to something physically, such as when a person’s tongue clings to the roof of his mouth (Psalm 137: 6) or when a man’s hand cleaves to his sword in battle (2 Samuel 23: 10). On the other hand, this word is used to describe ties of loyalty and affection. During war King David’s soldiers were so loyal to him that they would “cling” to him (2 Samuel 20: 2).

This word “cling” or “cleave” describes sex and marriage. It implies that clinging to one another in the sexual embrace **communicates and**

promises that one will cling to the other in affection and loyalty. The two meanings of “dabaq” come together. In the Bible there is no “Plain Sex.” Sex is not a casual or trivial encounter such as paying a cashier for your groceries. Sex is filled with meaning. **The sexual embrace communicates and symbolizes all that marriage means.** Physical union is a sign and symbol of spiritual, emotional, and social union.

For this reason, there have been religious groups where there would be a pause in the middle of a wedding. The couple would go to a nearby room that had been prepared. They would cling to each other, naked, in private, get dressed again, and return to finish the wedding to be introduced as husband and wife. They saw such a close tie between sex and marriage that the wedding could not be completed without sex. It would be good, I believe, to reclaim such a practice in our day. It would be a radical way to proclaim the dignity of sex in a world in which supposedly great sex is colored by an uncertain number of **shades of grey.**

Turning to the ideas communicated in the very famous novels by E. L. James, we see notions similar to those found in ancient mythology, some of which were communicated into our time by Sigmund Freud. In such ancient or modern mythology, life arises from destruction. In that world, sex is always connected with death and destruction; Eros and Thanatos are closely linked instincts. Sex is always dark. The author of the Grey books gave a clue to her

worldview by the choice of name for the main character, Christian Grey; if his name had been “Christian White,” it would be a different story.

In the Bible, sex is connected with life, even creating life. This is **sacred sex.** Created sex came in chapter 2 of Genesis, before the fall into sin which is recorded in the next chapter. We are not given any details of sacred sex. The sacredness between Adam and Eve is not something about which we are allowed to fantasize. It would be immorally intrusive for someone else, even the biblical author, to talk about Adam and Eve’s favorite **technique, position, or practice.** We must not be voyeurs. What we are told is that they clung to each other, they were naked, and they were not ashamed. It was meant to last for a lifetime. Sex was pure white. Grey and black sex only came later, after sin.

I must talk about *Fifty Shades of Grey*, because it is one of the world’s most widely read books, perhaps the most widely read book in all human history, with translations around the world. I think it is the only book which is more widely read than the Bible. The Bible was the world’s most widely read book for more than 500 years, until three or four years ago, when it was replaced by *Fifty Shades*, telling us something about contemporary culture. *Fifty Shades*’s main characters, Anastasia Steele and Christian Grey, are widely seen as the embodiment of twenty-first-century sexuality **at its best.** Yet I feel sorry for

people who think sex cannot get any better than that. I had to wonder if the author has ever experienced good sex.

You see in the story that Anastasia Steele experiences almost every form of **Angst** known to humanity, and all these forms of Angst are organic dimensions of her sexual relationship with Christian Grey. Their sexual relationship is not characterized by light, life, or joy. It is very **dark**. And the darkness does not arise from their specific sex techniques, practices, or positions. The darkness arises from the spiritual patterns in their hearts and souls. At times I had to wonder if her feelings related to sex should be described as hell on earth, though there was a sort of restoration at the end of the story. Why would anyone find this attractive? Yes, Anastasia describes “the weird electrical attraction crackling between us,” but I think this is pure fantasy, not something that normal people experience.² The very terminology promotes phony expectations among people with no sexual experience. In contrast, authentic white, sacred sex is real; I have experienced it.

Anyone who has experience with white, sacred sex will not be attracted to imitate the patterns of Steele and Grey. Those with the experience of white sex will breathe a sigh of relief that their sex is qualitatively different, qualitatively better.

I notice that whereas the philosophy of the sexual revolution emptied sex of meaning, Grey sex is filled with the worst possible meanings. Plain sex pres-

ents, I believe, a smaller threat to our humanity than does Grey sex. Both plain sex and Grey sex drive me back to the Bible, to see if anything better can be found.

Sacred sex can be filled with grace.

Of course, grace is never automatic. Taking the Lord’s Supper does not automatically bring God’s grace into your life; faith is needed. Reading the Bible does not automatically change your life; trust and obedience are needed. To experience grace in sacred sex, more is needed than clinging to each other, naked, for a lifetime. And that something more which is needed is the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

The apostle tells us “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control.” When this fruit is added to sacred sex, the result is ***Fifty Shades of White***. I wish I had the literary ability to write a book by that title. It may be the most needed book of our generation. Such a book would have to demonstrate that in our pursuit of white sex, a man and a woman are at the highest level of inter-dependence. For a man to experience white sex, his wife must be walking in the Spirit and actively practicing the fruit of the Spirit; for a woman to experience white sex, her husband must be walking in the Spirit and practicing the fruit of the Spirit. Then sacred sex is filled with grace.

Our world is filled with **promises regarding sex**. You need the right position, you need the right technique, you need the right position, you need the

right toy. All those promises are **false promises** because **sex is extremely spiritual**. To find white sex you need to be naked, for a lifetime, with a partner who is filled with the Holy Spirit. Nothing less will fill our heart need for intimacy and sexual companionship.

The term “sacred sex” is very old. It comes from ancient Chinese Taoism, more than 1,000 years ago. However, what the ancient Taoists described as sacred sex is not something we want to recommend. As part of what some described as sacred sex, they said it is best for a man to have sex with as many beautiful women as possible, and that a man should use a woman sexually to increase the length of the man’s health and life. Our definition of sacred sex should arise from Genesis 2, the story of creation, not from Taoism.

The term “sacred sex” has come into widespread current usage in our time from the teachers of “Modern Tantra” sexology. Modern Tantra no longer treats women so poorly, as did ancient Taoism. It mostly claims that good sex is slow and relaxed, with a focus on bonding between a man and a woman, with an equal focus on the fulfillment of both people. Some thoughtful Christians say Modern Tantra is a good philosophy of sex, if we leave out the remaining Taoist religious beliefs and consciously place this approach to sex within the story of Genesis 2. Specifically, we should reject the Taoist belief about the relationship between **orgasm and cosmic energy**. Orgasms are part of bonding between a wife and husband

in Christian sacred sex. And Christian sacred sex is between one man and one woman, for a lifetime.

What are spiritual disciplines? Spiritual disciplines are the habits and practices which are designed to develop certain qualities of our minds, spirits, and relationships. I would say they are regular practices that make us into the kind of people we think God wants us to be. The usual lists include Bible reading, prayer, meditation, participating in worship, giving, journaling, and so on. What is missing in all such lists that I have read is **frequent sacred sex**. That is why I wanted us to read from 1 Corinthians today.

What we say about spiritual formation should be an honest response to the spiritual problems of our times. It has been a **strategic mistake**, a terrible misstep in the life of the churches, I believe, not to include frequent sacred sex in what we say about spiritual formation and the spiritual disciplines.

Let’s say, for a moment, that the pastor of your church is discovered having sex in the church office. But, as it turns out, the person with whom he is having sex is his wife of 40 years. There will be embarrassment; some faces may turn red. But there will not be a scandal that destroys trust in the church or in the community. Instead, such a story, if it becomes well known, will help to build trust, because everyone in the community will know that all the pastor’s entire sexual energy is turned to the affections which he shares with his wife. It may even serve as good publicity for

your church; other people will say, “Wow! We want to learn what this pastor and his wife have learned,” though I would strongly prefer not to be that pastor myself.

Let me say it again: frequent sacred sex is a key part of spiritual formation for those who are married, and sacred sex must be taught as a crucial spiritual discipline. This must be part of our response to the sex scandals that are rocking both church and society. I hope my Roman Catholic counterparts hear or read this sermon so that I can begin that discussion with them.

I have said that sacred sex can be white and filled with grace, and a key that unlocks that grace is the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Let me suggest that there is a second related key, and that has to do with **how we talk about sex**.

I still remember the time when I was riding in a taxi in Prague 6 and I heard the words of the Blood Hound Gang, “You and me, Baby, ain’t nothin but mammals, so let’s do it like they do on the Discovery Channel.” Really, there is little about sex on the Discovery Channel; I have sometimes watched the Discovery Channel on TV. What this song illustrates is that there is a close connection between our **view of human nature and how we talk about sex**. The song writer knew very little about human dignity; therefore, the song speaks about sex in very undignified terms. People are described as animals who “do it.”

How we talk about things is very important. The book of James says, “**The tongue . . . is a fire**, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell” (James 3:6). If this is true, it should influence how we talk about sex.

This week I read a Christian marriage **website** that allows the readers to write stories of their own sexual relations with their spouses. A few of the stories were beautiful and reminded me of the Song of Solomon. But I found some of the stories degrading because of the language used to describe their bodies and the bodies of their spouses. As a young man I worked in factories and spent time with truck drivers, I heard how they talked. And that was the language of this website. This language was very undignified, not suitable for talking about people who are created in the image of God. It is our tongues that are evil, not the other parts of our bodies. It is possible to talk about our bodies and our sexuality in a dignified and holy manner.

It is largely with language, our choice of what words we will use, that we express **patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control**. Words create many of the fruit of the Spirit. Our words about sex can be grey, even black, or our words can be white and filled with grace. Let me say this in words that might embarrass some: **Even an orgasmic scream can be filled with grace if the right words are used in that scream**. And those

words help to create whatever follows. Words always create or destroy. A godly orgasmic scream is best followed by a whispered prayer of thanks.

Of course, there are some Christians whom God calls to a life of singleness or celibacy. Maybe you are such a person. Singleness, as a spiritual gift, frees a person for a greater degree of service in the Church and in the world; that person can take greater risks because he or she has very few family obligations. Those who are single should ask themselves if this is their calling and spiritual gift. Celibacy can be for a lifetime, or it can be for a short time to fulfill a short-term mission.

I know that some here are single and would prefer to be married. I wish I knew what to tell you. I can only hope that what I have said this morning will give you more realistic expectations of what sacred sex is about. Do not forget what I said earlier: our world is filled with false promises regarding sex, and those promises usually come from people who have little experience with white, sacred sex.

I want to conclude on a slightly different note. That is, God can forgive us for sexual sins and heal us from those wounds. In 1 Corinthians 6: 9–11 we read, “Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”

The Bible assumes that many in the Church have a background of terrible sexual sin. Some of the greatest biblical heroes, both men and women, had a background of sexual sin. But now, if we believe in Christ, we are washed, cleansed, and forgiven. The old life of sin is gone, and the new life has begun. If you have a background of sexual sin but have now turned to Christ, you can know that God no longer holds it against you. There is forgiveness and grace! Amen.

Annotation Anmerkungen

¹Thomas K. Johnson This essay is a revised version of a sermon preached at the International Church of Prague on September 30, 2018. Dr. Johnson is an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church in America. He serves the World Evangelical Alliance as senior advisor to the Theological Commission, Religious Freedom, and the Society of Christian Scholars. He is also

represents the WEA as Special Envoy to the Vatican. Many of his books and essays are available at: <https://thomaskjohnson.academia.edu/research#persecutionandhumanrights>.

²James, E L. *Fifty Shades of Grey*: Book 1 of the Fifty Shades trilogy (p. 87). Random House. Kindle Edition.

The Author

Über den Autor



Thomas K. Johnson is a graduate of Hope College (Michigan), and Covenant Theological Seminary (St. Louis). After a research fellowship at Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen (Germany), he received a Ph.D. in ethics from the University of Iowa. He has served as pastor of three evangelical churches, including serving as a church planter. He taught philosophy or theology in eleven universities and theological schools in nine countries, including the dissident, anticommunist European Humanities University in Minsk, Belarus, and Charles University in Prague. Dr. Johnson is presently Vice President for Research, Martin Bucer International School of Theology and Research Institutes; Senior Advisor to the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA); Special Advisor for the International Institute for Religious Freedom (WEA); Professor of Philosophy, Global Scholars; member of the Royal Ghassanid Academy of Arts and Sciences; Board President of the Comenius Institute (Prague); and an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church in America. In March 2016, he was appointed Special Envoy to the Vatican, representing the World Evangelical Alliance and its 600 million members. In December 2016 he was honored for his international human rights efforts with a knighthood from the Sovereign and Imperial House of Ghassan, the only Christian royal family in the Middle East.

The first edition of Johnson's *Human Rights: A Christian Primer* (2008) became a standard evangelical resource. The second edition (2016) was jointly published on behalf of the WEA and the Vatican-based *Dignitatis Humanae Institute*. He has written five other books and some two hundred fifty articles, essays, and book chapters, many of which are available on the websites of Martin Bucer Seminary, the World Reformed Fellowship, the International Institute for Religious Freedom, and the World Evangelical Alliance. He has edited 25 books on ethics and issues of religion and society, as well as numerous human rights reports. He lives in Prague with his wife, Leslie P. Johnson. She was the first director of the Christian International School of Prague and is now an educational consultant for the Association of Christian Schools International. They have three grown children as well as several grandchildren.

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Thomas Schirmmacher,
Prof. Dr. phil., Dr. theol., DD.

Editor: Ron Kubsch

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